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AUTHOR Leonard, Patricia Y.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Mid-life women in increasing numbers are seeking the assistance of mental health professionals to address critical development and contextual issues. The myriad of social and cultural changes of the past two decades have had a profound effect on the type, intensity, and prevalence of problems currently experienced by women between 30-50 years of age. In the 1980s, normal developmental issues and dynamics are confounded by major changes in family structure and economics, new social and professional roles and expectations, and the pressure associated with redefining lifelong values and perceptions. Until recently, little attention was devoted to the exploration of issues, attitudes, and development of this group. Traditional counseling approaches and development theory have failed to adequately confront the reality and impact of this disparate experience of males and females within American society. Effective counseling interactions and developmental support programs for women must be based upon a thorough understanding of their uniqueness. (ABL)

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Mid-Life Women: Research and Implications

Patricia Y. Leonard, Ph.D., Organizer
Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
University of New Orleans

Bernadette Mathews, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
University of New Orleans

Juni Bowes, M.S.
Department of Educational Leadership and Foundations
University of New Orleans

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INTRODUCTION

Mid-life women in increasing numbers are seeking the assistance of mental health professionals to address critical development and contextual issues. The myriad of social and cultural changes of the past two decades have had a profound effect on the type, intensity, and prevalence of problems currently experienced by women between 30-50 years of age. In the 1980's, normal developmental issues and dynamics are confounded by major changes in family structure and economics, new social and professional roles and expectations, and the pressure associated with redefining lifelong values and perceptions. Until recently, little attention was devoted to the exploration of issues, attitudes, and development of this group. Traditional counseling approaches and developmental theory have failed to adequately confront the reality and impact of this disparate experience of males and females within our society. Effective counseling interactions and developmental support programs for women must be based upon a thorough understanding of their uniqueness. This session provides a review of current literature on the developmental and contextual issues of mid-life women.

MEN AND WOMEN

Mid-life women differ from men and from women at other stages of development on a number of significant dimensions. One major area is that of level of well-being and/or life satisfaction. Lowenthal, Thurnher, and Chiriboga (1975) compared men and women at major life transition points (high school senior, newly wed, mid-life, and pre-retirement). This research suggests that women in their middle years are more highly distressed than men or women at any other life stage. These women

manifested poorer self-concepts, higher levels of pessimism, greater negativity toward their spouse, lower levels of life satisfaction, and higher levels of existential despair. An earlier study by Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960) found that though women and men did not differ significantly in general happiness, the women had poorer self-concepts, reported more psychiatric symptoms, were less satisfied with their marriages, and felt more inadequate as parents. Barnett and Baruch (1978) report that the reanalysis of mental health data indicates that women are no more disturbed than men when all categories of disturbance are included. Women are more likely to be categorized as having depression, functional psychoses, and neurotic disorders.

A second area of substantial difference is that of employment and economic status. Approximately 15% of all families are headed by women, yet female-headed households account for the majority of those families living below the poverty level. Women are disproportionately concentrated in low pay and/or low status careers.

WHO DOES WHAT	% who are women	% who are Black
Total work force	44.4	9.9
Corporate executives	36.8	5.2
Doctors	17.6	3.3
Nurses	94.3	6.7
Lawyers	18.0	2.9
Elementary school teachers	85.2	10.8
Sales supervisors	30.5	4.0
Sales workers	68.6	8.2
Postal clerks	43.5	29.8
Firefighters	1.9	7.8
Police and detectives	10.9	14.6
Cleaning jobs	41.5	23.8
Construction supervisors	1.6	3.8
Construction workers	2.8	15.0
Truck drivers	2.1	13.8

Time April 7, 1987

As a result 80% of the working women earn less than than $19,000 per year. The median annual income for female-headed families is $9,472 while that for two-parent families is $31,451. According to the National Association of Working Women, women earn 64% of the salary paid men in comparable positions. The feminization of poverty is a result of economic and social trends.

Gender has profound effects on socialization and resultant role expectations and perspectives. Women operate within a phenomenological field which includes perceptions, pressures, constraints, and expectations that differ from those which affect men. Further, mid-life women of the 1980's may experience stresses associated with adjusting to the shifts occasioned by the myriad of social transitions of the 1960's and 1970's. From 1970 to 1984 the number of divorced women between 30-44 has tripled from 6.1% to 18.1% (Bureau of Census, 1986.)

Two-parent families dropped from 71% in 1970 to 58% in 1986. Currently, 55% of all women work; they comprise 45% of the workforce. Fifty-one per cent of women with children under 3 years old work, and 70% of those with school-aged children (6-18 years) are now working. Fifty-five percent of the married couple families are dual-earner households. However, the increased participation of women in the workforce has not resulted in the alleviation of the traditional wife/mother role expectations. Most women in their middle years experience the stresses playing multiple roles simultaneously - worker, wife, mother, and usually others.

There is little doubt that men and women differ significantly in socialization, economic and social status, role expectations, and perceptions. However, despite the rather obvious and fundamentally gender-based differences in the socio-cultural context of men and women, several developmental theories have attempted to postulate single models which would be adequately descriptive of the growth process for both sexes.

TRADITIONAL DEVELOPMENT THEORIES AND MID-LIFE WOMEN: WHY THEY DON'T FIT

Until very recently, adult developmental theory has focuses primarily on men. Given the rather diverse development experiences, socio-cultural expectations, and economic and contextual realities of these two groups, the extension of male-based theory to women is highly suspect. The duality

of roles held by most contemporary adult women suggest different considerations in the conceptualization of developmental patterns. This presentation supports the shift from a more narrowly focused, sequential approach, traditionally descriptive of male development, to one with more flexibility. As we move toward an increasingly age-irrelevant society, a less linear approach may be more appropriate for examining women's concerns in general, as well as mid-life issues for both men and women.

During the past decade, psychology has witnessed an increased interest in, and emphasis on adult development, particularly during the middle-adult period (Erickson, 1982). Unfortunately, much of the research to date has involved male subjects exclusively; consequently, these findings may have limited validity in the lives of women. By adopting the male life cycle as the norm, theorists from Freud to Levinson have attempted to mold women into a masculine form.

Women in their middle years are at a crossroads in their developmental histories. Neither young and nubile nor old and feeble, they lack an image that represents their position. On one hand, the portrayal of middle-aged women in the media suggests that as women get older they become less attractive and more dispensable. On the other hand, research studies suggest that middle age is the prime of life, the time when one comes into one's own. This contradiction is illustrative of the middle years in a woman's life.

Middle age is generally regarded as one of the series of developmental stages that characterize the human life cycle. According to major developmental theories, life progresses sequentially along a continuum of stages "from womb to tomb" with one stage built on the other. Deficits during earlier stages can hinder full development in later life. The life issues that emerge at each stage derive from biological, social, and psychological sources.

Believing that Freud overemphasized the impact of childhood, Carl Jung (1968) conceived of development as a continuous process throughout the life cycle. He postulated the concept "midlife transition" and distinguished the first half of life ("morning of life") from the second half ("afternoon of life"). The dividing period ("noon of life") around age forty, bestowed the possibility of fundamental change. Jung may have been one of the first to state that life indeed began at 40. The ensuing process, termed "individuation" by Jung, allowed for the individual to develop formerly suppressed aspects of the self. Paramount to Jung's theory of individuation is the expression and integration of that portion of the self which had been neglected in the first half of life. Middle-aged men, for instance, may become more nurturing and begin to place greater emphasis on intimacy; women frequently grow more assertive and may increasingly value success and achievement in less domestic realms.

Erik Erickson (1982) expanded Jung's theory by delineating distinct stages of maturation. Whereas Jung accentuated the on-going process of individuation, for Erickson the formulation of identity was a task to be completed. Erickson held that although the content of the tasks may differ for men and women, the tasks themselves are identical. Some contemporary theorists have argued with this notion, suggesting that while for boys, issues regarding separation and individuation are critical for healthy gender identity, attachments are key for girls. Whereas boys must come to perceive themselves as different from their mothers and begin to identify with males, females experience themselves as like their mothers and do not need to make a cross-sex adjustment. Carol Gilligan (1982) tells us:

> "..The quality of embeddedness in social interaction and personal relationships that characterizes women's lives in contrast to men's becomes not only a descriptive difference but also a developmental liability when the milestones of childhood and adolescent development in the psychological literature are markers of increasing separation.

> "..Women's failure to separate then becomes by definition a failure to develop." (Gilligan (1982) p. 19)

Douvan and Adelson (1966) provided evidence that during adolescence two of Erickson's stages follow a different sequence for men than for women; for women, the achievement of intimacy (Erickson's sixth stage) appeared to be a prerequisite for the achievement of identify (Erickson's fifth stage). Gilligan (1982) found that for women the issues of identity and intimacy are fused.

Kohlberg's (1973) theory of moral development also contained unfounded assumptions about the similarity of men's and women's life stages. When studies comparing men's and women's moral development found women's lagging behind men, the conclusion appeared to be that women were morally backward. In the other extensive study, Gilligan (1982) concluded that women are not defective, but rather they assess moral issues in a manner congruent with their primary orientation toward caring interpersonal relationships, whereas men assess moral issues in relation to the ideal of autonomy.

Similar problems of fit occur with respect to Daniel Levinson's (1976) theory of developmental stages and issues, which was developed through intensive interviewing of a small sample of men. He views one's twenties as a time for entering marriage and the world of work; and one's thirties as a time for establishing oneself in these arenas. Toward 40 there is reconsideration of one's commitments and often attempts to free oneself from a previously central mentor, the famous BOOM phenomenon - becoming one's own man. This theory leaves some gaps when it is applied to women. A woman may not enter the world of work until her late thirties, she seldom has had a mentor, and even women with life-long career commitments rarely are in a position to reassess their

commitment pattern by age 40.

Both Erickson's and Levinson's models reflect male experience. They focus on chronological age as a key variable and they assume a continuous uninterrupted series of events such as marriage and occupational establishment. These assumptions may not snugly fit when applied to women.

The findings of Gilligan (1982) and Douvan and Adelson (1966) suggest that a linear model of distinct life stages occurring in a prescribed sequence disregards the uniqueness and complexity of women's experiences.

Bernice Neugarten (1968) lobbies for a change in venue regarding the focus of adult theory in mid-life. Asserting both that adult maturational processes are too multifaceted to lend themselves to a discrete, stepwise theory, and that psychological modification is continuous, she notes that medical advances have rendered many of our culture's previous notions of appropriate "middle-aged" behavior as no longer germane. It is certainly not uncommon to witness fifty-year-old women returning to the classroom, entering or re-entering the job market, and competing in marathons. As life styles change, our concepts of what it means to age "successfully" are also metamorphosized; consequently, generalizations concerning "normal" behavior at different stages in life are often unwarranted. This may be particularly valid when these norms are based solely on small samples of male subjects.

Neugarten (1979) emphasized the recurrent, cyclical nature of adult psychological themes. Criticizing the age-bound theories of Levinson and Erickson, she proposed that:

> "...Themes of adulthood do not in truth emerge at only given moments in life—each to be resolved and then put behind as if they were beads on a chain. Identity is made and remade: issues of intimacy and freedom and commitment to significant others, the pressures of time, the reformulation of life goals, stocktaking and reconciliation and acceptance of one's successes and failures—all of these preoccupy the young as well as the old.. it is something of a distortion to describe stages as if adult life were a staircase. Such

"recurrent motifs take on a new complexity in middle age because with the passage of time, life becomes more... complex."
(Neugarten, 1979, p. 891)

During the period from roughly 30 to 50 years of age, most women experience one or more life transitions which vary in intensity and focus. Reinke (1985), in a study of psychological change and chronological age, found that 78% of a sample of 60 women aged 30, 35, 40, and 45 retrospectively reported experiencing a major transition period between ages 27 and 30. The length of the transitional period varied, with a mean of 2.7 years. The transition periods were highly individual with respect to intensity, precipitating factors, and focus. They were not clearly tied to the family-life cycle of the women and may have been a function of the social and biological clock pressure issues associated with "reaching thirty", the entrance into life's "middle period". This beginning of mid-life crisis was characterized by an initial period of emotional disruption followed by periods of reassessment, increased focusing on self, and ending with an increased sense of well-being.

The early forties and the sixties were also identified by the subjects as transition periods. It was hypothesized that increased inferiority, reflection about life's finiteness, resignation to the realities of their lives, and greater mellowness were factors characteristic of the 40's crisis. During the 60's women felt their personalities changed towards greater assertiveness, expressiveness, patience, and mellowness. Women in their 50's reported more inner stability and higher levels of life satisfaction. Menopause generally occurred between 48-53, rarely coincided with major transitions, and was perceived as non-stressful by the majority of the subjects. During their 30's, interest in work and career development increased, job dissatisfaction lessened, and marital

quality/satisfaction decreased (late 20's-early 30's).

Ellicott's (1985) analysis of the data used by Reinke (1985) focused on family-cycle phases and psycho-social change. Ellicott suggests that societal and personal expectations associated with age (rather than chronological age per se) are relevant in the explanation of women's developmental states. Stages of the family cycle were no children, starting a family/preschool, school-age, adolescent, launching, and post-parental. Transitions were most prevalent in the starting a family/preschool (80%), launching (40%), and post-parental (33%) phases with most subjects experiencing at least one change during these periods. The nature of the transitions depended on the individual's life situation. The starting a family/preschool phase frequently coincided with the 27-30 transition previously discussed. Other research suggests that this period is characterized by work overload, decreased marital satisfaction, and changes in self-concept and identity. However, analysis of the Ellicott data for the 30-45 year olds did not substantiate any significant differences between those subjects experiencing transitions and those who did not. Higher levels of marital dissatisfaction, self-perceived change, increased introspection and assertiveness, greater personality change, and decreased personal development were about the same. Though launching of offspring is often perceived or expected to be traumatic for women, Ellicott points out that this was not the case for the women studied. Subjects experiencing post-parental transitions generally reported increased satisfaction and great levels of internal change. Ellicott concludes:

> "A greater number of systematic changes were related to family-cycle phase than to chronological age. This finding is consistent with the idea that women's lives are oriented around relationships and that women's development occurs in conjunction with changes in social roles."
>
> (Ellicott, 1985, p. 274)

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND COUNSELING

More qualitative and quantitative studies of midlife women are needed. Retrospective as well as cross-sectional designs which address psychological status variables, attitudes and perceptions, stressors, levels of well-being, and life focus could contribute to the effort to articulate a model(s) of adult female psycho-social development. The inclusion of family-cycle as well as age as independent variables is warranted. Demographic, educational, and economic variables which may affect role expectations and life realities should also be incorporated into research designs. Barnett and Bauch (1978) suggest adding locus of control and attribution to variables previously mentioned. We may productively direct our research toward the elucidation of commonalities and differences among women within and across age and family-cycle stages.

In a society where age is becoming less relevant, the counselor needs to be cognizant of clients struggling to identify with age norms and time-tables which no longer have real significance. Defining maturation as a prescribed sequence of age-appropriate tasks may be less accurate and less meaningful than a more flexible conceptualization. This is especially true for women whose child bearing, career focus, and life directions demonstrate considerable variability.

Conceptualizing the developmental patterns of women requires special attention to family-cycle as well as age. Whereas in the past the roles of wife and mother were the primary sources of identity for the majority of women in our culture, the contemporary large scale presence of females in the labor force necessitates that their lives be characterized by both family and worker roles. An understanding of this role duality (or multiplicity) becomes important in working with female clients, who frequently use phrases such as: "I feel so torn." "There's not enough of me to go around." "I don't have the time or energy to really do a good job at

anything because I have so many different hats to wear..."

An additional variable in this equation is the fact that women's values regarding family and career may wax and wane as they transit through the life cycle. Life satisfaction, as well, ebbs and peaks during different stages, lending a fluid, non-linear perspective from which to view one's life.

Lowenthal, Thurnher, and Chiriboga (1975) reported that while work is the most salient source of stress for males, women were more distressed by family problems. Hultsch and Deutsch (1981) suggest that women experience greater discomfort over events which occur to significant others in their lives, particularly their children, than do men. These findings support Gilligan's (1982) contention that for women the need to establish meaningful relationships with others may precede the drive to create meaningful work. "Intimacy goes along with identity, as a female comes to know herself as she is known, through her relationship with others." (Gilligan, 1985, p. 12)

Although there is truth to the contention that the problems which clients present in therapy (pain, loss, indecision, etc.) do not discriminate with respect to sex, age, or stage, our clients are nevertheless products of their time and culture. Consequently, it behooves the counselor to be cognizant of the impact of developmental urges and stirrings if s/he is to successfully guide the client through a stressful impasse.

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